☰

⌕

CRAIG HICKMAN   2017-04-28

GÜNTHER ANDERS: PROMETHEANISM IN AN AGE OF ACCELERATED POSSIBILITIES

NECROPOLITICS   GÜNTHER ANDERS, MARXISM, PROMETHEANISM, TECHNOLOGY

I will provisionally call it 'Promethean shame' for myself. I understand this to mean the 'shame when confronted by the "humiliatingly" high quality of fabricated things (selbstgemachten Dinge).'

—Diary entry, Günther Anders

Technics and Technology have been a force in human existence from the beginning, a notion Günther Anders reminds us is because we are born *unfinished*, as beings who need to make themselves with the help of artifice in order to be at home in the world.1 Anders who in the wake of Martin Heidegger, a man who was for a short time married to Hannah Arendt, would remain for the most part an unknown in the English speaking world (and, even now, one is hard pressed to find translations of his works from German into English). And, yet, his work is slowly gathering a following and resurgence, a man whose works align with such luminaries as Zygmunt Bauman, Thierry Bardini, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Veit Erlmann, Roberto Esposito, Maurizzio Lazzarato, Jean-Luc Nancy and Bernard Stiegler. A man who wrote on the impact of technology and technics in the lives of humans.

As Christopher John Müller in his study of Anders work *Prometheanism: Technology, Digital Culture and Human Obsolescence* remarks it is in the world of Anders that the challenge to which our present philosophical turn to technology in responds, and consists in 'taking conceptual account of the extent to which, in increasingly explicit ways, technology defines and redefines the human and does so downstream from the point at which a given technological creation was brought into effect'.1 That humans have been torn out of nature and the natural environment, developed artifice and artificial habitations to defend themselves against the dangerous environmental worlds surrounding it. Devising artificial prosthesis, tools, and appendages to support its own lack and nakedness in the face of a hostile and chaotic environment is part of what Stiegler following such thinking as Anders terms the *denaturalization* of the human: "this means that '"human nature" consists only in its technicity, [only] in its denaturalisation'. And with this notion we have, in effect, arrived back at our point of departure: Anders's suggestion that 'artificiality is the nature of human beings and their essence instability'. (P: KL 310)

Incomplete, unstable, artificial: the human has never been at home on planet earth. And, because of this we have always felt a certain amount of shame in the face of our investment in technics and technology. As Müller comments technology, is a blind

spot in our back: it invariably turns away from us the moment we seek to turn towards it in thought and feeling. If we take into account, therefore, that a relationship to technology has not only shaped 'the' human to the extent that the fabric of the human body and brain has evolved alongside the technological, but that a relationship to artifice also shapes the self-consciousness and self-awareness that each body animates in an irreducibly singular fashion, then thought needs to begin to think through the effects of this blindness rather than seeking to expel it by producing illuminating insights and general definitions. (P: KL 343)

Müller responds to this technological problematic asking "if the word 'technology' cannot simply name the *object* that our contemplative gestures seek to get hold of, but must rather be understood as naming a relationship to *artifice* that opens us to the very possibility of thought, then how can we respond to concrete and tangible technological developments? How can we think technology and the concrete effects machines have on our lives without falling back into the pattern of simply opposing humanity to a technological other?" (P: 356) This sense that technology is neither hostile nor friendly, and neither is it neutral; in fact, it fits none of our humanistic categories of critique or the critical enterprise as thus enacted. In this sense we need a new framing, a new paradigm within which to understand and confront technics and technology and its relations to the human species.

As will tell us Anders long career and much of his thought hinges on momentary feelings of curtailment, deprivation and obsolescence that become manifest while we use machines. These fleeting and often unacknowledged emotive tensions and resistances are seen as symptomatic of a relationship to artifice that is so intuitive that the formative effects that artifice has in general are not noticed at all. (P: KL 363) In a lengthy quote explains,

> Anders mobilises his phenomenology of machine use in order to illuminate the invisibility and feeling of normalcy and everydayness that *naturalise* artificial structures. Machine processes happen without our (emotional or physical) involvement: they take care of things in our stead and as such they shape the way we relate to ourselves because they slip from our consciousness. These processes are – if an analogy is permitted – as invisible and empowering as language is when it intuitively offers itself as an instrument at our disposal. That is to say, artificial media remain invisible instruments only while they are complicit; as Heidegger puts it with regard to language, it is invisible only 'until we cannot find the right word for something that irritates or gives us joy'. For Anders, machine-artifice configures our soul, which makes us feel all the more worried if we are shown up as inadequate machine users or inarticulate writers. It is in these moments of emotional turmoil and helplessness that the formative power of artifice reveals itself only to remind us of our innate lack of ability, powerlessness and obsolescence. These feelings lead Anders to a new conception of human finitude based around our inability to see or comprehend the artificial powers we blindly place our hope in. Every technological innovation has unforeseen effects and consequences while also reconfiguring the parameters of human existence. The further technology advances, the more it impresses on us that the human, as it is born, is obsolete, useless and embarrassing. As humans we are born *weltfremd*, strange to a world we can only inhabit by retreating into artificial structures. This very retreat into artifice, Anders suggests, is increasingly also leading to a world without humans, a world in which human existence is becoming ever more conditional and exposed to the power of artifice that highlights and accentuates every human flaw. (P: KL 366-380)

As Anders would say in a diary entry this feeling of shame before the magnificence of technology is at the heart of finitude: "Believe I have found the signs of an entirely new pudendum this morning; a form of shame that did not exist in the past. I will provisionally call it 'Promethean shame' for myself. I understand this to mean the 'shame when confronted by the "humiliatingly" high quality of fabricated things (selbstgemachten Dinge).'" (Quoted in Müller's translation I this same book.)

Anders calls his own approach 'philosophy of discrepancy'. The term 'discrepancy' captures the key concept that crystallises in the course of his post-war writings, the notion of a 'Promethean slope or gradient' (prometheisches Gefälle), a growing rift between our technologically mediated ability to collectively influence the world and our individual capacity to feel, and to emotively apprehend, what we are doing. (P: KL 383) This sense of discrepancy, the disparity we feel as technology takes on more and more the human work and qualities we once assumed were our birthright is causing alarms in the social body. Automation. Unsalaried employment. This sense that humans are being obsolesced in favor of their technological children is an ongoing apprehension in the collective psyche of the socius.

As Müller will tell it read through Anders, the debates currently revolving around artificial intelligence and digital technologies show themselves to be a supplementary ruse, for humans are not in danger of becoming obsolete because they might be replaced by intelligent machines, the innate obsolescence that has marked humanity from the beginning is 'merely' being amplified with ever more fateful consequences. As machine processes are increasingly capable of relieving us not just of physical but also of emotional and cognitive effort by allowing us to automate our correspondence and acts that we might not have the heart to do, a cold, calculative, non-human world is being established under the cover of a deceptive sense of normality. To develop this perspective I turn to the phenomenon of 'unsalaried work', which I define as the work we conduct to make ourselves obsolete, expendable and ultimately inhuman. (P: 448)

It was in that sprit that Anders would relate in his diary of visiting a technological exhibition with a dear friend,

Joined a tour together with T. of an exhibition of technology that has opened here. T. behaved in a most peculiar manner; so strangely, in fact, that I ended up only looking at him instead of the appliances on show. As soon as one of the highly complicated

pieces started to work, he lowered his eyes and fell silent. Even more strikingly, he concealed his hands behind his back, as if he were ashamed to have brought these heavy, graceless and obsolete instruments into the company of machines working with such accuracy and refinement.

But this 'as if he were ashamed' is too tentative. The pattern of behaviour left me in no doubt. The things, which he recognised as exemplars, as superior and as representatives of a higher class of being, really did play the same part that persons of authority or of acknowledged 'higher' classes used to play for his ancestors. To stand in his bodily clumsiness and his corporeal imprecision under the gaze of such perfect devices was really unbearable for him. He was truly ashamed.

When I try to investigate this 'Promethean shame' further, then its basis, 'the basic flaw' of the one who is feeling shame appears to be the nature of his own origins. T. is ashamed about having naturally grown instead of having been made. He is ashamed because he owes his existence to the blind and uncalculated, the highly archaic process of procreation and birth, which places him in stark contrast to the immaculate products, which are carefully designed through and through. His shame thus consists in his 'natum esse,'* in his lowly birth. He regards this as 'low' (not unlike the chronicler of founders of religion) precisely because it was a birth. Once he is ashamed of his antiquated line of descent, the same naturally also holds for its faulty and inescapable result: he is ashamed of himself. (P: KL 745-760)

This sense of not having been *made*, of being kludgy evolutionary accidents in a chaosmosis in which the human is imperfect, obsolete, and without value. Shame in the face of artifice, of things non-human that are taking on and perfecting human qualities to the point of replacing them, of the knowledge that artificial selection and adaptation to these technical worlds is what we've all been doing for millennia. Incomplete, unhinged, organic and entropic systems of clay we are living among cold and impersonal systems of perfection that were above all *designed* by us to surpass us. This sense that it is in this denaturalized world of the machinic phylum, the mechanosphere that humanity will abandon its organic forms for the extreme transformation and metamorphosis into technological artifice.

As Anders would say in a second diary entry,

> Promethean defiance is the refusal to owe anything, including oneself, to anyone else. Promethean pride consists of seeing everything, including oneself, as one's own achievement. Some vestiges of this stance so typical of the self-made man of the nineteenth century are certainly still alive today. But I doubt they are still characteristic of us. It seems that feelings and attitudes of a different kind have taken their place; attitudes resulting from the peculiar fate of Prometheanism. (P: KL 765)

I haven't read through the whole book yet, but am in process of doing that. The above is but an enticement for you to do the same. Looks to be a book to ponder, argue with, and think through.

---

1. Müller, Christopher John. Prometheanism: Technology, Digital Culture and Human Obsolescence (Critical Perspectives on Theory, Culture and Politics) (Kindle Locations 742-745). Rowman & Littlefield International. Kindle Edition. (P)

taken from here

Foto: Bernhard Weber

META

CONTACT
FORCE–INC/MILLE PLATEAUX

IMPRESSUM
DATENSCHUTZERKLÄRUNG

TAXONOMY

CATEGORIES
TAGS
AUTHORS
ALL INPUT

SOCIAL

FACEBOOK
INSTAGRAM
TWITTER